

Terminal Care Practice in Heian Pure Land Buddhism: The Case of the Nijūgo zammaie

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As part of the activities of the International Buddhist Section of the Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute of Otani University, Michael Conway, Takami Inoue and Robert F. Rhodes attended the 13th International Conference of the International Association for Japanese Studies held at Tallinn University in Tallinn, Estonia between August 24–27 of 2011 and presented the results of their research in a panel entitled “Spiritual Healing in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism: Cures for Suffering in Genshin’s and Shinran’s Thought.” This and following two articles are expanded versions of the papers read at the panel. The aim of the panel is indicated in the panel abstract, which is cited below.

In Japan, the Pure Land tradition has long been associated with rites concerning death, dying and the afterlife. Since the tradition posits salvation based on saying the nenbutsu at the moment of death in order to call Amida to welcome the practitioner to the Pure Land, the issue of dying in the right state of mind was taken to be of paramount importance. Genshin 源信 (943–1017) writes in great detail regarding problems of terminal care and approaching death in light of the Pure Land teachings. However rites and practices for the healing of physical illness are almost completely absent in the Shin Buddhist tradition, as presented by Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262). However, it is not without a discourse of healing and transformation based on the nenbutsu. In Shinran’s thought, these references take the form of metaphorical expressions regarding the extraordinary transformative power end-

owed in the nenbutsu and the entrusting mind that chants it. This panel explores the reasons for the absence of healing rituals and practices in the Shin tradition by considering ideas about the soteriological power of the nenbutsu presented in the thought of Genshin and Shinran.

The point we would like to make in our papers is that, despite some notable exceptions taken up in Takami Inoue's paper, mainstream Japanese Pure Land discourse does not focus much on physical healing. However, having said that, it must also be pointed out that the tradition has developed a discourse of healing and transformation based on the nenbutsu. Hence one of the major issues taken up in our panel is the question of how such a rhetoric of spiritual transformation based the metaphor of healing was created and how it functions, especially in the case of Shinran. It is hoped that these papers will serve as a catalyst for further investigations into the issues of healing and spiritual transformation in Pure Land Buddhism.

This paper focuses on the Nijūgo zammaie 二十五三昧會, a nenbutsu fellowship closely associated with the Japanese Tendai monk Genshin. The Nijūgo zammaie is a topic that has received much attention in recent years and many excellent studies have been published on it.¹ Building on these earlier studies, I will first discuss the discourse on deathbed practice found in the texts associated with this fellowship. In the latter half of the paper, I will introduce several examples suggesting that Japanese Pure Land Buddhist hagiographies do not place much emphasis on healing. Rather they focus on the acceptance of death, or, to put it differently, on facing death with hope and courage in the belief that one will be born after death in Amida Buddha's glorious Pure Land.

The Nijūgo zammaie is a fellowship of Tendai 天台 monks who got together to help each other gain birth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land. Historically, it is significant as one of the first nenbutsu associations to have been formed in Japan. The name of this organization literally means

1 Studies in English on this nenbutsu association include Bowring 1998, Dobbins 1999, Rhodes 2001 and Horton 2007: 64-67.

“Association of the Twenty-five Samādhis,” and, as its name indicates, it consisted of 25 monks, all residing in the Yokawa region of the Enryakuji 延暦寺, the head temple of the Tendai school located on Mt. Hiei 比叡山. It was begun in the fifth month of 986, just a year after Genshin completed the *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集, his epoch-making treatise on Pure Land Buddhism.

To achieve the goal of birth in the Pure Land, the members of the Nijūgo zammaie engaged in several activities, two of which were the most significant. First, they made a mutual pledge in which they promised that, when one of the members of the fellowship fell ill and was on the verge of death, the remaining members would rush to his side and encourage him to recite the nenbutsu. The association’s covenant called the *Yokawa Shuryōgon’in nijūgo zammai kishō* 横川首楞嚴院二十五昧起請 (hereafter *Kishō*) provides detailed instruction on how to care for the dying members. It stipulates that, when one of the members falls ill, he is to be taken to a hall called the *Ōjō’in* 往生院, which served as the association’s hospital. Once the sick monk was transferred to the hall, the other members of the fellowship were required to visit him in groups of two, nursing him two days at a time. Among the two nursing monks, the first provided the dying monk with instructions concerning the Buddhist teachings, while the second took care of patient’s miscellaneous physical needs and requests. Together, they assisted the dying monk perform spiritual practices, praying with him, providing him with medical care and alleviating his suffering in all possible ways. In this manner, they were to act as “good spiritual friends” (*zenchishiki* 善知識) for the dying monk, helping him to focus his mind on the nenbutsu at the hour of his death. Moreover, when the dying monk was about to expire, all the members of the association were to gather at his side to aid and encourage him by reciting the nenbutsu together. After death, the members also pledged to perform his funeral as well. In this way, the Nijūgo zammaie provided what we would nowadays call terminal care for the dying member.

It might be mentioned here that there is an interesting—actually a very

poignant—passage in the *Kishō* which suggests that the desire to seek the Pure Land was not the only motive for establishing the Nijūgo zammaie. Just as important (or perhaps more important) was the fear of confronting serious illness and death alone. In this passage, the author of the *Kishō* laments that he and his fellow monks of the fellowship are quite poor, living in humble thatched-roofed hermitages, with only thin blankets to protect themselves from the cold and having only coarse food to eat. Although many friends and visitors may come to visit them when they are healthy and active, who will find it worthwhile to pay any attention to them after they grow old and fall ill? Hence, the *Kishō* continues, they got together to look after each other, serving as a mutual support group for spiritual and physical care at old age (Hieizan senshūin and Eizan gakuin 1984, 5: 345–46). This suggests that the fear of being abandoned and having to fend for themselves once they have grown old and sick was a major factor behind the creation of this nenbutsu fellowship.

The second main activity of the Nijūgo zammaie was their monthly nenbutsu recitation meeting, which was held on the fifteenth of every month and lasted all night. According to the *Kishō*, during their monthly meeting, the monks first listened to a lecture on the *Lotus Sūtra* by an eminent scholar-monk and subsequently spent the entire night reciting the nenbutsu (Hieizan senshūin and Eizan gakuin 1984, 5: 339–40). This monthly nenbutsu recitation is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Nijūgo zammaie. Pure Land discourse at this time maintained that birth in the Pure Land could only be gained if one could focus one's mind on Amida and recite the nenbutsu at the moment of death. However, it is very difficult to concentrate on reciting the nenbutsu as one faces one's end, because of all the suffering and anxiety that one is subject to at this time. Hence, the members got together once a month to recite the nenbutsu together so they could train themselves to focus their minds on reciting it as they lay dying. For this reason, Yamaori Tetsuo aptly characterized the Nijūgo zammaie as “a congregation to prepare oneself for death” (Yamaori 1978, 29).

The need for such training in nenbutsu recitation has already been proposed two and a half centuries earlier by the Chinese Pure Land monk Taochuo 道綽 (562-646). He argued that the human mind has a very short attention span and that it can be likened to a monkey constantly jumping from one tree branch to the next, never staying still for an instant. Since it was believed necessary to have one's mind focused on Amida Buddha at the moment of death in order to be born in the Pure Land, one had to train one's mind to be able to concentrate on this Buddha at this critical moment. Taochuo describes the efficacy of such training using the following metaphor: if a tree is tilted in one direction, when it is cut down, it will fall in that direction. In the same way, if one's mind is directed towards Amida during ordinary times, then one will definitely go to Amida's land when one dies. Therefore, he continues,

Whenever the winds of death and dissolution come in a single instant, then a hundred pains will gather in the body. If you have not trained prior to this time, how can you assume that the nenbutsu will come to mind then? Each person should thus make a pact in advance with three to five people of like conviction. Whenever the time of death approaches (for any of them), they should offer each other mutual encouragement. They should chant the name of Amida for the dying person. (Dobbins 1999, 170)

Here Taochuo encourages Pure Land devotees to “make a pact in advance with three to five people” so they can encourage each other to recite the nenbutsu on their deathbed. It is likely that these words provided the inspiration for the Nijūgo zammaie.

As this shows, the Nijūgo zammaie provided a comprehensive, life-long system of spiritual cultivation aimed at achieving birth in the Pure Land. It is worth noting here that deathbed rituals for optimizing the chances for reaching the Pure Land had existed earlier. Several such examples can be found in the *Nihon ōjō gokurakuki* 日本往生極樂記 (Record of [People] in Japan Who Gained Birth in the Land of Supreme Bliss, hereafter

Gokurakuki) by Yoshishige no Yasutane 慶滋保胤 (933–1002), the earliest Japanese *ōjōden* 往生傳 (collections of biographies of monks who were believed to have gained birth in Amida's land at death). For example, the Tendai monk Enshō 延昌 (880–964) had a three week long continuous nenbutsu (*fudan nenbutsu* 不斷念佛) ceremony performed for him before he died. It may also be added that Enshō sponsored a meeting of monks on the fifteenth of every month, in which they chanted verses in praise of Amida and conducted debates on the Pure Land teachings and *Lotus Sūtra* (Inoue and Ōsone 1974, 27). This meeting may have provided a model for the Nijūgo zammaie, but this is uncertain. Another Tendai monk, Myōshō 明靖 (dates unknown), asked several monks to come to his bedside to recite Amida's name as his death approached (Inoue and Ōsone 1974, 30). Such examples were not limited to monks. The *Gokurakuki* relates how a nun asked her brother, the Daisōzū Kanchū 大僧都寛忠, to hold a continuous nenbutsu ceremony for her as she lay dying (Inoue and Ōsone 1974, 36). However, all of these deathbed rites were ad hoc affairs. In contrast, the Nijūgo zammaie was a systematic and life-long program of spiritual cultivation that provided both (1) continuous training to prepare for death as well as (2) spiritual care during one's final hours.

As noted above, the *Kishō* notes that one of the duties of the attendants nursing the dying monk is to provide medical care for the latter. However, the *Kishō* does not dwell too much on this point. Rather, it emphasizes, not the physical, but the spiritual care of the dying, highlighting the ways in which he should be assisted so he can gain safe passage to the Pure Land. A similar negative stance towards the curative power of the nenbutsu also underlies the stories in the various *ōjōden* collections. Of course, the *ōjōden* are not simply straightforward biographies of Pure Land devotees; rather they frequently provide idealized accounts of their final hours, in order to present a model for a “good death” to be imitated by later Pure Land believers. But, even then, it is striking that there is so little reference to people seeking Amida's help to recover from illness. Rather the very

opposite was sometimes the case. For example, there is the story of Gonchūnagon 権中納言 Minamoto no Akimoto 源顯基, found in the *Zoku honchō ōjōden* 續本朝往生傳 (Continued Biographies of People of Our Country who Attained Birth in the Pure Land) written by Ōe no Masafusa 大江匡房 in 1101 or soon thereafter. According to this account, Akimoto was a favorite of retired emperor Goichijō 後一乗院, and in a well-known incident, took the tonsure after the emperor's death, saying "a loyal minister cannot serve two lords." Be that as it may, the account continues that, sometimes later, he developed a tumor on his back (*nochini se no byo wo okoseri* 後に背の病を起せり). A doctor was called, and after examining it, advised Akimoto that it was curable. However, Akimoto refused treatment, and passed away reciting the nenbutsu (Inoue and Ōsone 1974, 228).

Why does the Pure Land discourse developed, for example, in the *Kishō* and the *ōjōden* collections, remain silent about the curative power of the nenbutsu practice focused on Amida? One possible reason may be Amida's role in the Buddhist pantheon: that is to say, with the fact that he is the buddha that looks after our welfare in the afterlife. As Inoue Mitsusada pointed out, when it was first introduced to Japan, Pure Land Buddhism was understood as a new spiritual technology for sending the dead off to a post-mortem paradise (Inoue 1956, 21). I suspect that, by this time, there was a definite "division of labor" of sorts among the buddhas, under which Amida was entrusted with one's postmortem welfare, while other buddhas were in charge of providing the so-called "worldly benefits" like longevity and recovery from illness. In a word, Amida was not in the curing business to begin with. He was the one you turned to after all attempt at curing your illness proved futile.

A second reason for the lack of emphasis on the curative power of the nenbutsu is because Pure Land discourse maintains that existence in the realms of transmigration is, in itself, a form of disease and delusion. In a famous passage at the beginning of the *Ōjōyōshū*, Genshin reminds us that "There is no place where you can be at ease in the triple realms of trans-

migration” (T 84, 33a) and that genuine ease can only be found in the Pure Land. For this reason, Genshin continues, every sane person should seek to “escape quickly from” this diseased world of transmigration. (It may be remembered here that the word “disease” originally derives from an Old French word meaning “dis-ease”, “a state characterized by a lack of ease.”) For this reason, the goal of Pure Land practice is actually therapeutic: that of recovering from this state of “dis-ease” and gaining a thorough-going peace of mind, which can only be attained in the Pure Land. This entails a radical transformation in the orientation of one’s life: from a life oriented towards success (however it may be defined) in this world to the world beyond.

This is related to a third reason, which is that, paradoxically, for Pure Land Buddhists (but, I am compelled to add here, with the important exception of Shinran), the goal of life is death; or, more to the point, to end their life in the proper state of mind so that they can be born in Amida’s Pure Land. The mental attitude on the deathbed is of great significance because, unless one’s mind is focused on Amida at this moment, it was believed impossible to be born successfully in the Pure Land. Hence, Pure Land discourse in such texts as the *Kishō* and the *ōjōden* biographies privilege accounts of the final moment of death, highlighting the admonition to remain exclusively focused on the nenbutsu at this crucial moment.

To repeat, distraction from the nenbutsu at the moment of death was believed to have catastrophic consequences, since it not only prevents birth in the Pure Land, but can also result in rebirth in undesirable realms of existence, such as the world of animals. Hence, great emphasis was placed on cutting off attachment to everything except the nenbutsu when one was about to breathe one’s last. According to the *Kishō*, the primary reason why the dying monk should be transferred to the Ōjō’in as their illness progressed, was so that they can become free from all the distractions and attachments that would engage his attention if he remained in his usual dwelling. Moreover, the monks nursing the dying monk were instructed to take

precautionary measures so that the “three forms of attachments” do not arise in the sick monk’s mind: (1) attachments to loved ones and worldly possessions, (2) attachment to life and (3) attachment to future rebirths (Hieizan senshūin and Eizan gakuin 1984, 5: 346). Any suggestion that the nenbutsu may help one recover from illness would only serve to increase one’s attachment to life and distract one from the goal of birth in the Pure Land. Thus they were, of necessity, expunged from Pure Land discourse.

Significantly, Pure Land narratives include cautionary tales about people who failed to reach the Pure Land because they remained attached to worldly things even as their end approached. One typical story concerns the case of the monk Zenchin 禪珍 (956–1021), the grandson of Fujiwara no Naotsura 藤原直連, the governor of Kaga 加賀 Province, who died at the age of 65. His story is found in the *Ryōgon’in nijūgo zammai kesshū kakochō* 楞嚴院二十五三昧結集過去帳 (Register of the Members of the Assembly of Twenty-five Samādhis of Ryōgon’in, cited below as “*Kakochō*”), a record of the deceased members of the Nijūgo zammaie. Although Zenchin was a diligent nenbutsu practitioner, he had one grave fault: he was extremely fond of a small white porcelain vase in his possession. Unfortunately, the vase was swindled from him when he came down with illness. Henceforth, he grew melancholy and, even on his deathbed, continued to lament the loss of his vase. After he died, Zenchin appeared in a dream to the person who had taken the vase from him and declared: “I should have become free from (the cycle of) birth and death within this lifetime, but now, because of the vase, I have again returned to the world of suffering. But if you will construct a *sotoba* 卒塔婆 (grave marker) for me, I will realize my original wish (of achieving birth in the Pure Land).” As a result of the dream, a *sotoba* was built for Zenchin (Hirabayashi 1985, 51a). Since a note appended to this story in the *Kakochō* states that Zenchin was not a member of the Nijūgo zammaie, it can be assumed that this story was included as a warning against harboring attachment to anything other than birth in the Pure Land on the deathbed.

The tremendous importance place on having the right state of mind at the moment of death became a major source of anxiety for Pure Land practitioners.² It was in order to deal with this anxiety that the Nijūgo zammaie required its members to undergo sustained training in saying the nenbutsu and to assist each other to focus on Amida in their dying moments. But even with such thoroughgoing support system, it proved impossible to overcome this anxiety completely. But a new approach to this problem was proposed by Shinran two centuries later in the Kamakura period. Shinran argued that it was not the act of saying the nenbutsu on the deathbed that determined one's birth in the Pure Land, but faith. And this faith, which was acquired during one's lifetime, consisted of the conviction that Amida promises to lead to the Pure Land just those very people who cannot do anything on their own (such as saying the nenbutsu on the deathbed) to save themselves. So, paradoxically, this means that there is no need to worry whether or not one can say the nenbutsu on the deathbed, because it is just those people who cannot do the deathbed nenbutsu that Amida promises to save.

Abbreviation

T Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭 eds. 1924–1934. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. 85 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai. Followed by volume, page and column.

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² This is pointed out in the "Introduction" to *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*. See Stone and Walter 2008, 8.

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